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ABSTRACT

Natural helpers exist even among the most oppressed populations in this country, particularly migrant women, and recognition of their helping networks can give professional caregivers access to a resource that is often more adaptive, more efficient, and more humane than many static, impersonal, and obsolete human service bureaucracies. Migrant problems and issues are intensified by new waves of immigrants who seek to join the migrant stream and thus aggravate an already over-taxed human service system. When migrants seek help, the first help is sought from among the extended family, then from crew boss or church, before turning to friends. Natural helpers continue to relate to the vulnerability of those in need beyond the solution of their own problem. They may seek funds from other migrants, provide services (such as midwifery), or act as intermediaries to formal service providers. Some natural helpers volunteer to work in service centers or become employed in situations which capitalize on their natural skills. Natural helpers can be utilized to provide both preventative and support functions. The opportunities for tapping into natural helping networks are boundless; it merely requires a recognition of their existence and a willingness to identify natural helpers and work with them. (BRR)

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NATURAL HELPERS: A STUDY OF PRIMARY CAREGIVERS AMONG MIGRANT WOMEN

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In an era of shrinking resources in the human services, natural helping networks offer a rich resource for meeting human needs. They are a resource that is often more adaptive, more efficient and more humane than many of the static, impersonal and obsolete human service bureaucracies with which we are all familiar.

Social work literature in recent years unequivocally confirms that natural helpers and professionals can be joined in partnerships which are mutually beneficial to the people whom they serve.[1] The first task in establishing such partnerships is the identification of natural helpers in the community of concern. The population of concern in this present research is the migrant/farm worker population in South Florida.

The problems and issues dramatized so poignantly many years ago by John Steinbeck, Robert Coles and the television documentary "Harvest of Shame" have yet to be solved.[2] They are aggravated even more today by new waves of immigrants who seek to join the migrant stream. Laws have changed, but victories won in Congress and the Florida legislature are yet to be enforced because of insufficient allocations to enforce them. Although laws have been passed offering migrants more legal protection, better wages, workers' compensation, unemployment benefits and improved housing, most apply only to United States citizens, more and more of whom are being driven out of farm work by new refugees desperately willing to work for lower wages.

The focus of this research is on farm workers, particularly migrant women and the natural helping networks that exist amongst this population. Are these communities, in fact, woven together by any natural helping networks? Does the extreme deprivation which many of these people face inhibit and prohibit the functioning of such helping networks? What kinds of networks exist "up and down the road" for the migrant farmworker? Do networks operate; and if so,

how? Could or should they be tapped in any way? These questions were the catalyst for the current research, research that is just in its infancy, but that has already yielded some answers and raised as many more questions. Before one can look at some of those answers, some background facts about migrant farmworkers in South Florida are necessary.

It is estimated that some 100,000 farm workers are dependent on Florida's winter crops.[3] This year new Haitian migrants have aggravated an already overtaxed human service system.[4] Some 7,000 Haitians found jobs in the fields. Several thousand more converged on migrant centers seeking non-existent farm work. Their arrival stirred up racial tensions, swamped health clinics, food stamp offices, and jammed already-scarce migrant housing, leaving many "traditional" migrants jobless.

The Haitians undoubtedly will become the "fifth stream" of migrants who now move in Florida. The other four streams are a Black-American stream; a Jamaican stream (contract migrants who fly into South Florida each November to harvest sugar cane); and two Mexican streams.

Illegal aliens from Mexico make up the majority of workers in the farm industry. Federal immigration officials are virtually powerless to stop the flow of illegal aliens. Caught between inadequate staffs and a de facto policy that encourages readily available cheap labor, hundreds of thousands of illegal aliens slip across the border each year. Even the worst of conditions in this country are generally better than what these aliens have left behind. They are eager to work and crew bosses are eager to hire them. Their illegal status allows farmers and crew bosses to ignore or circumvent many state and federal laws, thus contributing to a situation of extreme deprivation and oppression.

Estimates on what the average farmworker earns range from $2,200 to $7,500 per capita, depending on the source of one's statistics. (The $7,500

figure comes from a University of Florida economist's figure for citrus workers. The $2,200 figure comes from a migrant advocacy organization and is based on United States Department of Agriculture statistics for all reported farm worker earnings.) Reality is probably somewhere in the middle at a figure of $4,852 published in the Miami Herald, a figure well below the controversial "poverty" line.

Various racial, national, and ethnic groups are clearly segregated, one from the other. They work on separate work crews, with separate crew bosses, and are separated in labor camps, houses, churches, and in various sections of town. Tensions are unavoidable in this situation of competition for scarce resources. Fights and shootings are a regular occurrence.

Farmworkers are hired to work by a crew boss who contracts with the growers for work for his crew. The crew boss is paid by the grower and he in turn pays his crew. The crew boss often provides housing and transportation for his crew, deducting these expenses from the pay (usually in cash) of the crew members. Some crew chiefs operate their own labor camps and stores. They often fail to pay minimum wages, overcharge for housing and food, and refuse to let workers leave their camps.

By law, crew chiefs must be licensed annually, provide liability insurance for all vehicles that transport migrants, submit earnings' statements to all employees, pay social security taxes for them, submit proof that any housing they provide meets sanitary standards, and see that workers' compensation coverage is provided. Violations of these laws are rampant. It is next to impossible to get violations prosecuted. Florida Rural Legal Assistance is some six-to-eight months behind in investigating complaints. Federal officials have only five investigators assigned to monitor 5,000 registered crew chiefs.

A look at natural helping efforts amongst these people has become a look at survival. The picture is one of caring and courage in the presence of

extreme oppression and suffering.

The usual progression when one seeks help for economic, social or emotional problems tends to be family first, then friends and neighbors in one's "informal" network. If this fails, "semi-formal" systems, like self-help groups and PTA, are sought. Only when all else fails are "formal" institutions, such as human service agencies and churches, approached for help.

For the migrant seeking help, the progression appears to be altered by the social environment. The first help is sought from amongst the extended family. Migrants often turn to either the crew boss or church, before turning to friends. The choice is closely tied to the problem at hand, and the way in which social roles are institutionalized amongst this group. There is much mistrust and jealousy amongst the women. Male dominance keeps them separated and lacking in trust, while the males socialize freely.

Families work and live together. Often a family will send a member as an advanced guard to find a place to live and to sign on with a crew boss. Once settled, the call goes out to the rest of the family; other neighbors may follow. Seven hundred Haitians from Jean Rabel, a poor village in Haiti, converged complete with their pastor on Immokalee, Florida this winter.[5] Clearly communication networks operate amongst migrant groups.

The writer has observed repeated examples of scarce family resources being used to help those without any. Survival is foremost. Extended families get together frequently and pool their resources to help those who are down and out.

To the members of a family, the ethic is clearly, "What's yours is mine." What little there is, is shared. Solutions to pressing financial needs are often solved in clever ways. One family butchered and barbecued a pig, selling tickets for the barbecue to raise money to help their recently widowed daughter.

Several hundred dollars were raised at this event, and went a long way towards helping the woman meet expenses. The author observed another woman raise $125 for a rent deposit in a matter of minutes. She met the crew coming in from the groves on pay day at the supermarket. She collected a dollar or two from each member as she told them of her need. The crew boss gave her the balance on credit. After getting set up at the migrant camp, this woman cleverly made extra money fixing lunches and dinners for single crew members.

This summer many migrants never went North. The high cost of gas and subsistence until the crops are ready have made it no longer financially feasible.

One woman who has made it out of the migrant stream and works in a day-care center explained, in her front yard:

> That family over there, for as long as I can remember used to go up and down the road. Some of the people that used to go with them say that when they get to North Carolina sometimes they have to wait two or three weeks to start workin', and then the little money they have, they spend that up trying to wait on the crops to get ripe...and then by the time the crops get ripe they work one or two days and it starts raining.... and it might rain for two or three days...once there they don't have anything... and when they come back, they don't have anything and figure they may as well stay here and whatever little bit they have, take care of that, cause when they're gone they have to keep paying the rent to have a place when they come back. Mind you, not much of a place... People livin' here all year long, livin' in houses and stuff don't have a bathroom, don't know what an inside bath is...That family right

there, they don't have a bathroom...the bathroom is right there amongst those trees....It's a lot of people have no water, got to go outside and get water...don't know how to use a bathroom... don't know how to flush the stool, where the water goes, why it does ...you know, they are rural poor farmworkers caught in the same situation whether they go up and down the road or not.

The local priest mentioned that this was a particularly late and prosperous season in the citrus groves, and that fact may perhaps account for why some folks stayed behind this year.

Typical of a family that stayed behind this year for the first time in ten years is a Mexican family, headed by a widow. This extended family numbers fifteen, living in three rooms in a migrant camp. They have more living space than most families. All but a son-in-law and daughter have no work this summer. The son-in-law left the stream and is working as a welder. This grueling work, done in the sun, in heavy protective clothing, is much preferred to working in the groves for the "boss man". His wife is working as a Vista volunteer in the local school. They help support the whole extended family.

This family in the past would have turned to the crew boss for help when resources dwindled. This help most often has strings attached, and for the crew boss it is self-serving. It clearly is not the altruistic caring of a "natural helper".

This widowed woman and her daughters stayed behind this summer due to a confrontation with the crew boss after ten years of sexual harassment. Sexual harassment and abuse of women is rampant amongst crew bosses. This Hispanic woman said:

I had a fight with the crew leader...I told him I was not gonna raise my children for him...He said if one of my girls wants something

with him, nobody was going to stop him...not even his parents, not even his wife...We stopped working with him...we were working for his brother. Now the two brothers are working together, and we are not working...He gets close to women because he has a couple of hundred dollars in his pocket, and starts buying them let's say a Coke... or candy...then they think he's wonderful. My daughter is 14 years old. He's 45.

The crew chief is both revered and despised. Those who grant him favors sometimes get work that is less strenuous, such as picking up stubs and checking on the crew, rather than picking fruit. Along with loaning money when resources are low, this crew chief has in turn borrowed money from this woman which he never paid back. Many of these women are extraordinarily careful with their money. One woman said, "I can do with $5 what most people do with $50."

There are caring crew bosses, but they are few and far between.

Many farmworkers turn to the local Catholic church for counseling and help. The church runs a non-sectarian service center staffed by many local natural helpers turned volunteer. In fact, the widowed mother described above, has herself volunteered in the service center. She has been named by several people as a natural helper and emerging leader in the Hispanic community. This writer has monitored her helping activities through the year; clearly they have been related to the availability of resources and the problems she personally faces. In mid-winter, when work and money were steady, she was active in behalf of her neighbors and church. She often raises money to help others in need in the community by going from person to person and collecting a dollar here and there. She attended the Parent Advisory Committee meetings at the local school, volunteered in the Church Service Center, and appeared positive

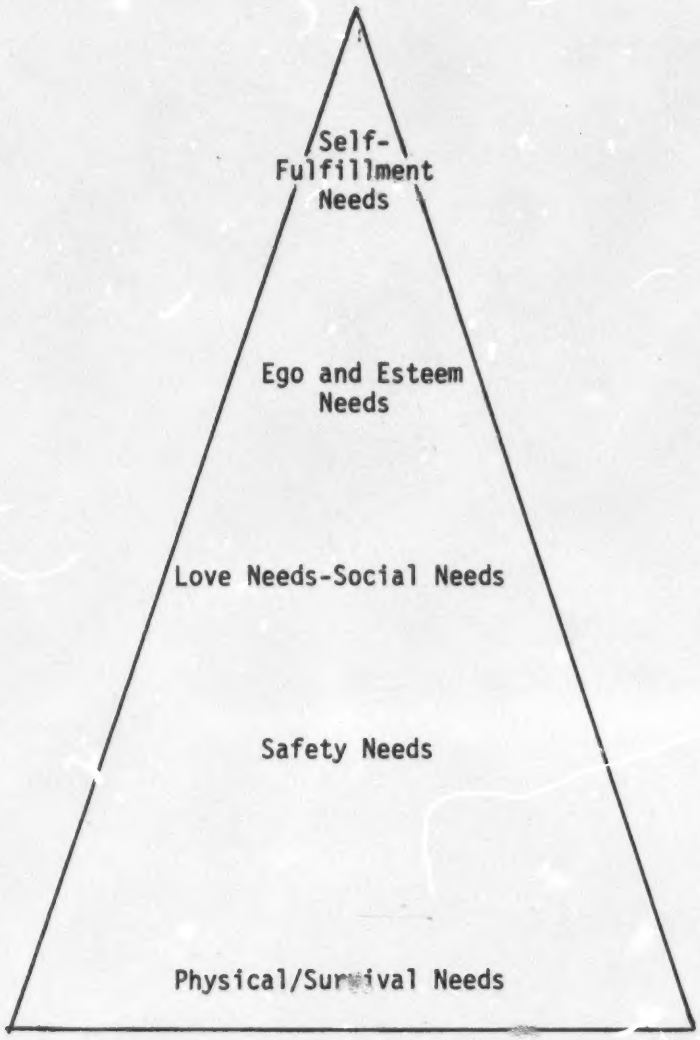
and energetic about her neighbors and community. When resources dwindled, so did her energy and her optimism. Sadly, when her son-in-law recently had a serious accident on the job leaving the family with virtually no income, this woman returned to work with her older daughters for the crew boss she despised. And with a steady income, her helping activities have once again increased. As one observer put it: "Survival comes before sanity." Clearly, natural helping activities are contingent on basic need fulfillment.

If we consider Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (see Figure 1), helping activities ebb and flow in relationship to basic need fulfillment. Only when lower order Physical/Survival Needs (for food and shelter) and Safety Needs (for protection from physical and psychological threat, fear, and anxiety) are being met can one act on the higher order needs of others (i.e. Social Needs.) Our helper's interests at this point can be tapped relative to her personal pressing needs for financial resources. In other words, she is able to work with neighbors to help with mutual problems around basic survival needs, but it would be unlikely to find her involved in any larger issues at this time. This is a very important understanding for social workers and community organizers.

For most people, once basic needs have been met, they will no longer be motivated to continue to join with others in need. The natural helper, we have identified and followed over time continue to relate to the vulnerability of those in need beyond the solution of her/his own problem.

Sensitivity to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and how they relate to one's service goals is important for anyone working with any disadvantaged community and its natural helpers.

The situations observed in the migrant community tend to call into question the characteristic of natural helpers which Collins and Pancoast identify as "freedom from drain". Like professional helpers, natural helpers



To do what you must to become fully yourself. To develop your own individuality. To become everything you are capable of becoming.

Respect and liking for yourself and others. Strength, competence, status, achievement, freedom, fame.

Acceptance, membership, affections, belonging, feeling loved and wanted.

Protection from physical and psychological threat, fear, and anxiety. The need for order, structure and security.

Food, water, shelter, clothing, etc.

ABRAHAM MASLOW'S HEIRARCHY OF NEED[6]

(FIGURE 1)

are subject to personal stress and difficulties. Most often when this happens in a migrant family (i.e. sickness or interpersonal problems), the whole family will stay home from work without hesitation, a sensible response which often vexes employers and is mistakenly labeled as irresponsible.

One of the problems that keeps migrants, particularly migrant women, separated and distrustful of one another is the oppressed role of women and children. In spite of financial need, the women are often kept at home during the early child rearing years and literally not allowed to leave the home to socialize. The children are likewise kept from socializing with anyone but their brothers and sisters. Eventually they all go to work together in the fields.

But there are women who fight back and are indeed natural helpers in spite of customs. One such woman, now a permanent farmworker resident of Indiantown, Florida is nick-named "Hard Shell".

"I grew up in the fields pickin' cotton, tomatoes, beans, cucumber..... all kinds of jobs. I start workin' over there where I'm working now in 1964... I start with hoein, cutting sprouts, trimmin'. Now I run the pumps, I use the lawn mower...you name it. I do a man's job. I drive in the big equipment and tractor."

Work as she might long days, "Hard Shell", is also the local lay mid-wife who has delivered 126 babies and has never been paid for even one delivery. Her work as a midwife began when she was alone, out in the country, and expecting her fourth child. She was forced to deliver her own baby. Subsequently, she delivered 10 more of her own, and started helping other women.

"It don't take me much to learn...and I never went to college...I never went to the high class school...I learned from my momma, and a little bit from people. These women they just come to me...because everybody know me...people

say go see me...so they come. Especially husbands, they say, we don't have any job, and I cannot afford to put my wife in a hospital...and so and so say I will help them, so I do.

"Hard Shell" frequently is called from the groves to deliver babies and her foreman is good about letting her go. In fact she delivered his grandchildren in a trailer in the groves. She describes her most recent delivery:

> "I was away for the holiday and soon as I come in the house...the doorbell...here comes the grandmama..."please come, please"...when I went up there, she was laying on the floor. I could not move her. I bring the baby right on the floor and it was cold. Then she don't have nothing to go around her or around the baby, so her daddy was wearing a jacket. I say, "take that damn jacket off you and let me wrap that baby in the jacket"...I said, "it's cold...look at the baby." And I wrap the little girl in the clothes and after I fix her and everything, I put her in bed and I say..."don't move, I'll be back". I come here...there is a Spanish woman here, I say I need some clothes...I was pitch white... she gives me some clothes...I was running all over the streets looking for some clothes, neighbors give me some bedspreads, some blankets, and things like that. Then me and this lady here, Faith, Pete's wife, went back up there. I said to her, "now let me take care of her and you take care of the baby." She said, "but I never did such a thing"...and I say, "well just bathe her with baby oil and wrap her real good, cause I done take care of her navel already and everything was OK." So she did it...I take care of the momma and she took care of the baby! Like other natural helpers she knows how to mobilize ~~other~~ neighbors to help her out.

Her folk practices as observed by a local doctor are both sensitive and accurate. She has never lost a baby and knows when to send a mother to the

hospital for special care.

In farmworker communities there are numerous natural helpers among the permanent residents who can be identified by asking people who they turn to when they need help with a variety of problems. When a name appears over and over again, you will usually find an invaluable resource person at the other end.

Such a woman recently left the groves for a job managing the local laundromat. She spends hours listening to people's problems while folding laundry and keeping an eye on the store. She questioned me about how she could help a young man who drops by to talk, who she feared would be put in jail for "disturbing the peace." Her opinion was that he needed psychiatric help, and that he would get more upset in prison. She was indeed right! A referral was made to a social agency, that in turn sent an advocate to court with him. With treatment and the support of his friend at the laundromat, the young man is making excellent strides.

Clearly there is much to be gained by building formal linkages between professionals and these natural helpers. Natural helpers can be utilized to provide both preventative and support functions. The opportunities for tapping into natural helping networks are boundless. It merely requires a recognition of their existence and a willingness to reach out to identify natural helpers and work with them. It is not the intent of this paper to describe how one does that. The process of building partnerships has been ably described in social work literature. The work of Collins and Pancoast, Greenfield, Morales, et al. provide guidelines on identifying and building these partnerships. Rather, it is the intent of the present research to demonstrate that natural helpers exist even amongst the most oppressed populations in this country; and to point out that by identifying these folks, and giving them support, we repeatedly see them move beyond our expectations. (In the theoretical terms of Abraham Maslow, we are acknowledging their social needs

and encouraging them towards ego and esteem needs and self-fulfillment.) These modest folks who feel they are doing nothing special would say more simply as one did, "It is nothing, I'm just doing what is natural." Clearly these helpers possess another gift than riches, a gift that enriches their communities, and can vastly enrich the work of helping professionals.

FOOTNOTES

1
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6
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7
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